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a cura di Luca Colliva, Anna Filigenzi, Luca Maria Olivieri

con l'assistenza editoriale di Marco Baldi



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BETWEEN STORYTELLING AND PERFORMANCE.
THE NARRATIVE OF THE BUDDHA'S LIFE
IN URBANIZED GANDHARA

PIA BRANCACCIO

Between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE Gandharan artists created a body of narrative sculpture recounting the Buddha's life story in a chronologically sequential manner and it was in this context that an anthropomorphic image of the Teacher emerged for the first time. To quote the words of Maurizio Taddei (2003: 511) "The great diversity of the art of Gandhara in comparison with that of India proper does not consist in its being 'narrative' rather than 'symbolical,' but in the introduction of a type of narration that can be defined as 'historical' and 'linear.' This type of narration is absolutely original compared with Indian art." The goal of this contribution is not to engage with discussions on the framework of narrative and narrativity (Wolf 2003) as applicable to the visual arts of Gandhara, but rather to explore the possible reasons that led to the creation of a radically new way to represent the life of the Buddha in the art of the North-West of the Indian subcontinent around the beginning of the Common Era. I would like to propose that the particular narrative format of Gandharan sculpture was inspired by representational modes proper of dramatic performances. Theater acquired popularity in the urban environment of the Kushan period, and the narrative syntax of Gandharan art appears to be rooted in the dramatic ethos of the time.

When comparing Gandharan reliefs depicting the Buddha's life (Zwalf 1996: 90-151) with earlier examples from North India, such as the reliefs from the *vedikā* of the stupas at Bharhut or Sanchi (Cunningham 1998: pls XIV-XVI; Marshall, Foucher 1940: vol. 2, pls 19-59), the extent to which Gandharan views revolutionized the traditional way of narrating stories through images becomes immediately apparent. The North Indian reliefs offer a synchronic view of an event where the before and after are by no means clear. In Gandhara, on the other end, the action unfolds in a linear manner, the protagonists are clearly indicated and there is no spatial or chronological ambiguity. Vidya

Deheja (1997) in her work on narrative strategies in early Buddhist art from India identifies Gandharan art as a visual tradition dominated by linear narratives and “mono-scenic narrations.” Taddei who digs deeper into the fabric of Gandharan narrative art, remarks that the visual repertory of the Buddha’s life constitutes in this pictorial tradition a complete life cycle in which the sequence of individual episodes does not break the substantial unity of the story. In Gandhara, the Buddha’s life becomes a spiritual biography, not a simple succession of actions, and Taddei (2003: 512) goes on to observe that the “earthly temporality of life [...] is intertwined with the temporality of myth: the pivotal moments of Buddha’s life [...] are placed in *illo tempore*, but also precisely located in a particular moment of a life which is the model for all men’s life.” In essence, the conceptual framework of the life of the Buddha in Gandharan art reflects a dramatic adaptation of the biographical event where the universality of the re-enactment triggers a sense of *mimesis* in the viewers.

The narrative of the Buddha’s life unfolds like a play on the sculpted panels around small stupas erected at Buddhist sites in Gandhara as attestations of devotion. The life episodes selected are arranged in chronological order, from the Teacher’s birth to his death and funeral. When devotees walk clockwise around the small monument, the sequential placement of images recreates a spatial and temporal progression proper of a theatrical performance. The characters in the reliefs were designed to be viewed from this particular point of view, and each of the life episodes is framed by pillars setting the stage for scene represented. The Buddha is obviously the main protagonist of the events while all secondary characters are perfectly cast to highlight the moral of the story. The choreographies of the panels also reiterate the idea that the devotee is a spectator: in many stupa reliefs there are viewers looking at the unfolding of the feats from balconies and arcades.

One of the most distinctive aspects of Gandharan narratives is the dramatic emphasis placed on characters gestures, postures and placements within each scene. These performative features are especially glaring in episodes where the Buddha converts heretics to the *dharma*. In an unprovenanced relief depicting the scolding of a naked ascetic (Brancaccio 1991: 123, 129-130; Taddei 2003: 266, figs 2-3; Fig. 1), likely part of a stupa false gable depicting the story of the conversion of the *Pāṭikaputta* as described in the *Pāṭikasutta* preserved in the Pali tradition (Brancaccio 1991: 124), the action unfolds just like in a theatrical piece. The panel depicts the rather comical incident of a naked ascetic who cannot stand due to a trick played by the Buddha’s magical powers. The ascetic appears literally stuck on a stool and unable to get up even with the help of others: one figure pulls him with a rope from the front while another tries to lift him up from behind. The detail of the tilting backward of the ascetic’s head as he is forcefully pushed and pulled, is something that locates the narrative strategies adopted by the Gandharan artists in the realm of performativity. The incident is also staged in a theatrical way with the apparition of Vajrapāṇi



Fig. 1 - The Scorning of a Naked Ascetic. Provenance unknown. Private Collection. After Taddei 2003: 266, fig. 2.

who likes a *deus ex machina* descends from above the pavilion. In a recent study dedicated to this particular episode of the Buddha's life as narrated in Pali sources, Eviatar Shulman remarks how this conversion story is constructed as a *belief narrative* possibly including folkloric elements (Shulman 2021). In fact, one could suggest that the dramatization of the episode as portrayed in Gandharan art may have been inspired by performative elements proper of an actual *mise-en-scène* of the story.

The same could be said of the visual narratives of the conversion of Aṅgulimāla in Gandharan art, where the Buddha tames the fierce brigand who used to wear a *māla* of fingers severed from his victims hands, hence his unique name (Brancaccio 1999: 105-107). The tale, also woven as a *belief narrative*, embodies the universal paradigm of how *dharma* can redeem and transform individuals regardless of their past. In Gandhara the story of this dangerous outlaw who went on to become an Arhat encountered great success and scenes of Aṅgulimāla's conversion are frequently included in the pictorial narratives, sometimes also extrapolated from the visual sequence of images and blown up on a larger scale on false gables affixed frontally to stupas.

The relief from Sahri Bahlol (Fig. 2) depicts the last moment of the episode when the Buddha stops Aṅgulimāla from committing the most terrible crime—the killing of his own mother. Aṅgulimāla, with his peculiar crown of fingers,



Fig. 2 - The Conversion of Aṅgulimāla, from Sahri Bahlol, Peshawar Museum. After Ingholt 1957; Brancaccio 1999: 106, fig. 1.

is shown on the right about to strike his own mother, while the Buddha appears in the center to stop him. Aṅgulimāla is portrayed twice more in the relief, first assaulting the Buddha and then prostrating at his feet, having thrown away his sword and crown, subjugated by the Buddha and his dharma. Long ago Maurizio Taddei (2003: 120) pointed out that the typical position in which Aṅgulimāla is represented in Gandharan art is reminiscent of “Dionysian scenes with figures in violent motions” found in the repertoires of Roman sarcophagi and decorated pottery. Aside from the fact that Dionysian imagery in the Graeco-Roman milieu is often associated with the world of drama and such connotation may have well carried on in the East (Brancaccio, Liu 2009), the images represented on the sarcophagi were often connected with the theatrical tradition in an indirect way. As observed in the context of Roman sarcophagi, “the fixing of gestures in visual form emphasized the representation of a memorable character and resulted in a more highly codified repertory of images. As familiar gestures were transferred from the realm of everyday life to the stage, and then to the visual arts, there was a progressive ‘petrification’ of their form, and concomitant ‘crystallization’ of their content, necessary for their continuing intelligibility” (Koortbojian 1995: 7).

Could this be the case for Gandharan narratives as well? This is not to say that Gandharan reliefs represented actual Buddhist plays performed by local actors. What I am trying to suggest is that there is a profound dramatic framework behind the innovative formulation of Gandharan narrative, and that may have been informed by theatre. The impetus for the narration of the Buddha's life story that is so rigorously arranged in a chronological fashion, that is thoughtfully staged on the stupas with a profusion of dramatic details, and lacks the emblematic iconicity of Indian art, may be profoundly linked to the development of a dramaturgical tradition. Unfortunately, we know little about Buddhist drama at the beginning of the Common Era. Yet much of the information we have points to the North-West of the Indian subcontinent as an important place for the establishment of this particular tradition. Theatre is a key cultural component of urban life, and the development of the city in the North-West in the Kushan period, along with a flourishing of court culture may have created a fertile ground for the local growth of a dramatic tradition.

Aśvaghōṣa, the first known playwright in the history of Sanskrit theatre who authored dramas on Buddhist themes as well as the well-known poem *Buddhacarita*, was affiliated with the Kushan court. It has been remarked that in general Aśvaghōṣa's work is very different from other known biographies of the Buddha: for example, in the *Buddhacarita* "the events are better organized, the tale is more closely knit and, above all, this work unlike the others, is an artistic whole" (Bhattacharji 1993: 35). In fact, the same can be said for the fabric of the life of the Buddha in Gandharan narrative sculpture, and it would be hard to imagine that these two traditions germinating around the same time in Gandhara developed independently from each other. This is not to say that the Gandharan artworks are modeled on the poetic text of the Buddha's life composed by Aśvaghōṣa. In fact, scholars have in vain tried to find correspondence between the sequences of events narrated in the *Buddhacarita* and the ones represented in Gandharan sculpture. What I am suggesting is that both the narratives of the Buddha's life, the poetic and the visual, are expressions of the same dramatic ethos that might have developed in Gandhara and pervaded the arts of the Kushan time.

Lüders' publication of three play fragments found amidst a group of early Buddhist manuscripts from Kyzil (Lüders 1911) dated to the 2nd century and reflecting the activity of Sarvāstivāda monks (Sander 1991), suggests that Buddhist drama was used as a powerful tool to propagate the *dharma*. These Sanskrit fragments have been identified not without contention as belonging to the *Śāriputraprakaraṇam*, an allegorical drama with ordinary characters composed by the writer Aśvaghōṣa. One of them includes a dialogue between Śāriputra, one of the Buddha's chief disciple, and the Vidūṣaka, or the courtly jester of classical Sanskrit theatre who actually in this fragment speaks in Prakrit; another fragment contains the interlude to the allegorical play (Tieken 2010). It is clear therefore that the dramatic techniques employed in Buddhist drama were iden-



Fig. 3 - Stucco Head from Taxila. British Museum Acc. No. 1856,0412.1. © British Museum.

tical to those used in courtly Sanskrit theater. Regardless of the authorship of these play fragments, scholars seem to agree that they were the product of the cultural milieu of the Kushan period, thus confirming the popularity of Buddhist drama in the North-West of the Indian Subcontinent during the first three centuries of the Common Era.

A fragment of a play also surfaced among a group of Buddhist manuscript fragments from Afghanistan acquired by the Schoyen Collection in 2002 (Hartmann 2006). The surviving text may belong to an unidentified Buddhist drama—the characters mentioned

include again the *Vidūṣaka* and a king who announces his desire to leave the mundane world probably as a result of a vision of the Buddha (Franco, Schlingloff 2011-2012: 20). The fragmentary text of the play also mentions a character called Puṣkara—a name that in Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita* belongs to a king of Gandhara who was among those converted by the Buddha in the North-West, possibly related to Puṣkarasārīn, the king of Taxila mentioned in the *Mūlasarvāstivādinaya* (*ibid.*: 22). Images of the *Vidūṣaka*, the courtly jester of Sanskrit plays, have also been identified in early Buddhist art from India and the Kucha oasis. They appear in a few sculptural examples from the Buddhist sites of Mathura and Amaravati, as well as in wall paintings from Ajanta caves (Zin 2015); in the Kucha area they have been identified among the figures painted in the Buddhist caves at Kyzil and possibly at other neighboring sites (Artl, Hiyama 2015). Two stucco heads from Gandhara one in the holdings of the Victoria and Albert Museum and attributed to the Khyber region, and one in the British Museum likely from Taxila (Fig. 3), have been also recognized as representations of the *Vidūṣaka* because of their distinctive hairdo (Artl, Hiyama 2018).¹

All textual and visual evidence mentioned above suggests that dramatic representations were integral to the early Buddhist cultures of India, and in par-

¹ G. Tucci interpreted an unusual image depicted in a frame from an arched niche from Butkara I as a caricature of a brahman linked to the *Vidūṣaka* type (Faccenna, Taddei 1964: 171, pl. DCVIII).

ticular to the North-West of the Buddhist subcontinent where much of the early textual and visual material comes from. Unfortunately, archaeologists working in the North-West have not been able to identify architectural spaces specifically designated for performances. Cities like Barikot in Swat, so masterfully investigated by Pierfrancesco Callieri and after him by Luca M. Olivieri of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan, have not revealed any spaces that could be specifically identified as *loci* designated for dramatic performances.

Nevertheless, the lack of theatres does not imply the absence of drama (Brancaccio, Liu 2009: 238-239). Temporary structures were probably used for performances, and back curtains were likely used to define the stage and to indicate the context of the scenes performed, much as described in the *Natya-sastra*. In this Sanskrit canonical source on theatre, the scene backdrop is called *yavanika*, a word that unmistakably links theatre to “*yavanas*,” the Indian appellation given to people of Western origin (Saxena 1997: 69). In the Western, classical dramatic tradition, curtains were also used to stage performances while in the Hellenistic comedy a cloth in the background was conventionally employed to suggest that the action took place in interiors (Webster 1956: 20-21). Representations of curtains or *yavanika* appear on the *vedika* of a Buddhist stupa from the Kushan site of Sanghol in Punjab (Gupta 1985: fig. 22; Czuma 1985: nos 41-42) where they are associated with images of women, intoxication and wine that may refer to characters of dramatic performances. Evidence of popular actors as active religious patrons at Mathura is also corroborated by the findings of a votive inscription from the site of Jamalpur in Mathura that explicitly mentions a local family of actors headed by the Candaka brothers as Naga worshippers (Lüders 1961: 62, no. 85, K 100). It should be mentioned in this context that the Western, Greek “origin” of Indian theatre has also been a source of great debate in past scholarship, and mostly rejected by scholars such as Sylvain Lévi in his monograph on Indian Theatre (1890). However, Johannes Bronkhorst (2003: 802-803) in re-examining such scholarship, invites us to reconsider this vexed question and points to the multicultural North-West of the Indian subcontinent as a locus of great relevance in the genesis of the Indic dramatic tradition.

Depiction of actors dressed in Western garb have been found in Gandharan art. The Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan under the ACT Field School Project (2011-2016) has unearthed several decorated fragments from minor stupas at the Buddhist site of Gumbat Balo Kale in Swat representing series of figures ostensibly intent in recitation and displaying dramatic gestures (Olivieri 2014; Brancaccio, Olivieri 2019; Figs 4-5).² Two cornices from Gumbat in the

² Luca M. Olivieri informed me that many more reliefs of this class of figured friezes (conventionally known as “the actors”) were excavated by the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Govt of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa in 2021 at the site of Abbasaheb-china, which is located in a side valley between Amluk-kara and Gumbat Balo Kale.



Fig. 4 - Fragment of a small stupa cornice from Gumbat Balo Kale, Inv. no. GBK 18. Swat Museum, Saidu Sharif, KP, Pakistan. Photo E. Loliva, courtesy ISMEO/ACT.



Fig. 5 - Fragment of a small stupa cornice from Gumbat Balo Kale, Inv. no. GBK 268. Swat Museum, Saidu Sharif, KP, Pakistan. Photo E. Loliva, courtesy ISMEO/ACT.

holdings of the Victoria and Albert Museum (I.M.87-1939; I.M.88-1939) also display similar characters represented in a series of 'duets' (Ackermann 1975: 53-54, pl. Vb-c). The personages from the cornices and stupa fragments at



Fig. 6 - Fragment of a figurative frieze from a small stupa from Gumbat Balo Kale, Inv. no. GBK 184. Swat Museum, Saidu Sharif, KP, Pakistan. Photo E. Loliva, courtesy ISMEO/ACT.

Gumbat Balo Kale wear a mantle or a tunic like outfit (Figs 4-5) and in a few instances are represented with a wreath on the head (Fig. 6). These sets of images from Gumbat appear surprisingly related to scenes of performers painted on walls of the Roman Columbarium of Villa Doria Pamphili that are dated to the 1st century CE (Fig. 7); in particular the enigmatic character represented at Gumbat while holding open his mantle to show his naked body (Fig. 8) seems to be a Northwestern interpretation of the dancing satyr painted in one of the Colombarium scenes (Fig. 9a-b). The Roman paintings were positioned in long rectangular panels between the funerary niches of the Colombarium. They have been identified as depictions of travelling performers and most recently reinterpreted as pantomimes performed in domestic convivial contexts (Dunbabin 2004) and thus not staged in traditional theatre settings. It is hard to say whether the Gandharan reliefs illustrated actual pantomime like performances that may have taken place in the region, or if they simply reinterpreted imported visual templates. In any case, they suggest that a certain familiarity with dramatic models or representations of performances existed among the local communities.

Buddhist drama continues still today to be used as a way to enhance the religious experience of devotees. In the Tibetan tradition *Cham* performances that incorporate mostly dance are undertaken by monks at temple festivals (Collins 2013), while in the Theravada tradition from South-East Asia the *Vessantara Jātaka* continues to be performed during specific religious celebrations



Fig. 7 - Detail of the Wall Paintings from the Columbarium of Villa Doria Pamphili, Museo di Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Roma. Photo Miguel Hermoso Cuesta - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=37729746>.



Fig. 8 - Fragment of a figurative frieze from a small stupa from Gumbat Balo Kale, Inv. no. GBK 841, and detail. Swat Museum, Saidu Sharif, KP, Pakistan. Photo E. Loliva, courtesy ISMEO/ACT. Sketch-drawings F. Martore.

(Bowie 2018). Buddhist texts suggest that also in antiquity drama provided a mean to gain knowledge of the Buddha.

The reference cited by Winternitz (1971: III, 197) from the *Avadānaśataka* mentions that a dancer named Kuvalayā “attained the highest peak of purity when she belonged to a group of actors in one of her earlier lives and performed a Buddhist drama (*nāṭaka*) in honour of one of the early Buddhas.” The *Nāṭaka* was the preeminent dramatic form described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*: it was a performance carried out by a small group of actors who enacted the mythical acts of a hero who was either a king or a god; a *Nāṭaka* emphasized the theme of heroism and used a dignified language on the stage (Winternitz 1971: III, 185). Very relevant for a reconstruction of the popularity of early Buddhist drama are the references contained in the *Aśokāvadāna* of the *Divyāvadāna*: this text was compiled sometime during the Kushan period in the North-West of the Indian Subcontinent and therefore speaks of the same milieu that gave birth to Gandharan narrative art. In particular the *Aśokāvadāna* is valuable to art historians as it sheds light upon the practices of worshiping images and shrines. In relating Māra’s subjugation by Upagupta, the text explains how the evil Māra, at Upagupta’s request, impersonates the Buddha. Upagupta never got a chance to see the physical form (*rūpakāya*) of the Buddha who had entered nirvana, and therefore begs Māra to show him the Buddha’s appearance. Here is how John Strong (2002: 193) translates this key passage from the *Aśokāvadāna*: “Then Māra, after he had gone far into the forest and taken on the form of the Buddha, emerged again from that wood like an actor wearing a bright costume.”



Fig. 9a-b - Satyre, Detail of a Wall Painting from the Columbarium of Villa Doria Pamphili in Rome, panel E IX. After Bendinelli 1941: tav. agg. 3b; sketch-drawings F. Martore.

The sight of Māra's masquerade as the Buddha triggers great joy in Upagupta and pushes the devout monk to prostrate at the feet of the impersonator. At this point the text clarifies that Upagupta is not worshipping Māra but the Buddha he represents—an explanation that not only sanctions the cult of images but shows that at the time when the *Aśokāvadāna* was redacted, actors used to stage Buddhist plays. In fact Sylvain Lévi (1907: 116) noted long ago how some of the poetic exchanges occurring between Māra and Upagupta seem to have been lifted from works of the playwright Aśvaghoṣa.

Most important, the *Aśokāvadāna* states that the sight of a Buddha in a dramatic act engenders devotion comparable to that elicited by an image, therefore spelling out the conceptual and functional relationship existing between Buddhist performing arts and visual arts in the Kushan world. Drama might have been used in urbanized Gandhara as a popular and accessible medium to unpack the exemplary message of the Buddha to a cultural diverse pool of devotees. If it is true that “Gandharan art was not the *result* of Buddhist expansion, but *one of the means* through which Buddhism expanded—a strong visual propaganda based on powerful economic support” as Pierfrancesco Callieri (2006: 79) so insightfully remarked in one of his masterful articles that has changed the way we think about Buddhism in urbanized Gandhara, then the adoption of drama as a means of expression for the new Buddhist ideology would make perfect sense, especially in a multicultural place where both the Western dramatic tradition and the Indic one were solidly established.

To conclude, the remarks presented above may suggest a new avenue for the interpretation of the genesis of Buddhist narrative sculpture in Gandhara during the Kushan period, a time when urban culture and Buddhism seem to be profoundly interconnected, as demonstrated by the groundbreaking work carried out in Swat by Pierfrancesco Callieri, to whom this article is dedicated with gratitude and admiration. Scholars have in vain attempted to identify the source of the distinctive narrative tradition characteristic of the Buddhist reliefs from Gandhara. It is possible that the local popularity of drama developed in Buddhist and urban environments may have inspired the creation of a poetic, sequential and cohesive life story of the Buddha in the art of the North-West of the Indian Subcontinent.

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